I have selected verses from the 11 chapter of Hebrews:

1: Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

3: Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

_The Winter’s Tale_, one of Shakespeare’s last plays, opens with a friendly debate between Leontes, King of Sicily, and Polixenes, his childhood friend. Polixenes has been visiting in Sicily for 9 months, and declares that it is time he returned to his own kingdom. Leontes urges him to stay, but without success. Only when his wife, Hermione, joins his entreaties does Polixenes give in and agree to one more week. Hermione is heavily pregnant, nearing her due date. Leontes suddenly conceives a suspicion that his wife and best friend are lovers, that the baby is not his. The suspicion strikes him out of the blue, like an infectious disease, but once in his mind, it determines how he interprets everything. He conspires to have his friend killed, and when Polixenes flees, that, for Leontes, confirms his guilt. His wife’s beauty is a sign that outward appearances deceive, and when she firmly denies the charge, it’s a sign of the bold impudence of sin. If courtiers tell him he’s wrong, they’re lying. One blunt and rather comical courtier protests that if Hermione is guilty, then he’ll “geld” all his daughters, because if she’s not pure, then no one can be. But neither rational argument nor testimony can shake Leontes’s certainty. He even sends messengers to the oracle at Delphi, but when they return with the oracle’s affirmation of Hermione’s innocence, Leontes declares “there is no truth at all in the oracle.”
Shakespeare dramatizes Leontes’s epistemological train wreck when Leontes compares his knowledge to that of a person who drinks from a cup that has a spider in it. “There may be in the cup/ a spider steeped, and one may drink, depart./ and yet partake no venom, for his knowledge/ is not infected.” But, Leontes continues, “I have drunk, and seen the spider.” He wants to communicate how he was fine before he perceived his wife’s infidelity, but the metaphor doesn’t quite work. The drink itself isn’t poisoned – “one may drink, depart, and yet partake no venom.” It’s the perception – seeing the spider – that infects the partaker.

Leontes’ fixed misapprehension is deeply troubling because although extreme, it rings true to human nature. We all have the potential to perceive according to false preconceptions that frame how we interpret everything and that themselves can’t be shaken by any amount of evidence or testimony from others. What hope do we have of avoiding diseased perception?

Shakespeare’s solution in the *Winter’s Tale*, at least for Leontes, has two parts. First, right after the messengers bring the report of the oracle’s word, a servant rushes in to report that Leontes’s beloved son and heir has died of grief at his mother’s treatment. The news hits Leontes like a thunderbolt. The fact of his son’s death opens his eyes. But it is too late; Hermione has collapsed. Crippled with guilt, without hope for the future, Leontes arranges for the burial of his wife and son, and vows that he will visit the tomb daily and water it with his tears. The first half of the play ends with stasis: a grief that will daily go through the same hopeless motions.

**Breaking down a false mental frame is not enough, then.** The resolution, for Leontes, is one of the most amazing and challenging in Shakespeare’s plays. Sixteen years pass. The baby daughter that Hermione gave birth to shortly before her death was, on Leontes’s orders, exposed on a wild ocean shore. The girl is found and raised by shepherds. The King’s son falls
in love with the girl, named Perdita, the lost one. His father opposes his son’s marriage to one so far below his station, and the young couple flee to Sicily, where the aging Leontes, looking at the girl’s fresh beauty, seems to be tempted to take Perdita for himself. But Paulina steps in…

Paulina was the wise lady-in-waiting on Hermione who attempted to make Leontes see the truth, and who berated him for his sins when Hermione collapsed. She has become Leontes’s conscience, reminding him of what he has done. So when Leontes takes notice of the fair young Perdita, Paulina sternly warns “Sir, my liege, your eye hath too much youth in’t.”

But of course, as happens in fairy tales, Perdita’s true parentage comes to light, she can marry her prince, and she’s reunited with her father. But that’s not the end, happy as it might seem, for it leaves Leontes in his own impasse – how to move beyond his knowledge of his own horrible, willful blindness. Paulina steps forward. Come, she says, I have commissioned a statue of your wife, and it is finally done. Come view it. Solemnly, they proceed to the gallery.

Paulina draws a curtain and all are struck silent with wonder. Leontes finally speaks; he begs the stone to chide him for what he has done, for having been more stone than it. He continues to marvel – the statue is so true to life. He’s so torn with grief that Polixenes and others urge him to withdraw, and Paulina offers to draw the curtain closed, warning him that his fancy will make him think the statue moves, and Leontes, indeed, thinks he sees blood pulsing in the veins. The others worry that he will go mad, but Paulina tells him “I could afflict you further.” You must, she declares “resolve you/ for more amazement. If you can behold it./ I’ll make the statue move indeed, descend/ and take you by the hand. But then you’ll think - / which I protest against – I am assisted/ by wicked powers.” Leontes responds simply “what you can make her do/ I am content to look on.”
The next minutes are magical. Paulina warns “It is required/ You do awake your faith.” She calls for music. “Tis time,” she declares, “Descend. Be stone no more.” And the statue comes to life. Hermione descends from the pedestal and holds out her hand to Leontes. Leontes is overwhelmed. “Oh” he exclaims, “she’s warm! If this be magic, let it be an art lawful as eating.” Hermione has lived in hope to see her daughter, borne up by the oracle’s promise, even while Leontes lived in grief without hope. Now the family is reunited in joy and wonder, Hermione and Perdita restored to Leontes as if from the dead.

But why couldn’t Paulina just have told Leontes that his wife was still alive, waiting for the fulfillment of the oracle? Shakespeare seems to be saying something about the value of ceremony, spectacle, art: Leontes must see this performance of resurrection. Why?

When I teach this play, we struggle with the question of the value of spectacle. All of us here probably value good church music, but we might also be able to think of questionable uses of the arts that look to us like emotional manipulation: a mega-church stirring up worshipers through driving electronic music, maybe. How can what Paulina stages, amplifying awe and wonder with music and drama, be a legitimate means to help Leontes, and not just emotional manipulation?

Our suspicion of manipulation through spectacle is understandable, given modern political culture. Every line in a candidate’s script, every detail of the setting, every song in the build-up to the candidate’s entrance, has been calculated. The cultural critic Raymond Williams makes the point that we live in a dramatized society. Everything is staged. As a result, we’re jaded about drama, conscious of the calculation and artifice behind spectacle. Surely it isn’t an aid to knowledge? In fact, isn’t it more likely to lead us by the nose, make us swallow falsities? How does spectacle contribute anything to sharing God’s truth?
Yet Shakespeare seems to be suggesting that drama is not only legitimate but necessary. Paulina insists “it is required you do awake your faith.” Why? One possibility is that faith is a necessary part of knowledge, and art helps to remind us of the trust and wonder involved in faith. Leontes needed not only the knowledge that Paulina was still alive, but faith in the truth and wonder of that fact. The ceremony brought to life not just the statue but the significance. Mere manipulative spectacle, mere button-pushing pageantry, might catch us up in the moment, but art that is in touch with what is real and important will linger in our consciousness, and may help give life and meaning to the truths of logic and evidence. Faith is the evidence of things not seen.